

To: Members of the Community Environmental Advisory Commission

From: Sue Hunter Weir, Chair, Friends of the Cemetery

I am writing in response to the proposal to introduce sheep and/or goats into Minneapolis Pioneers and Soldiers Memorial Cemetery. I am chair of Friends of the Cemetery, an all-volunteer organization whose mission is to preserve and maintain the cemetery. We offer tours and host a variety of programs and events every year. I have been doing research and writing about the cemetery for about 25 years. Our organization partnered with the City of Minneapolis to raise \$2 million to restore the cemetery's historic decorative fence. I have spoken with Mr. McDonough on several occasions and he is aware of the fact that our organization does not support his proposal.

I know that he also spoke with Mike Kennedy, former Director of Transportation, Department of Public Works. Mike retired this spring but for 28 years was responsible for overseeing the maintenance and staffing in the cemetery. Before he left, he sent Mr. McDonough an email stating that he did not support the proposal for reasons similar, though not identical, to mine.

I apologize in advance for what is likely to be a lengthy letter but there are a number of concerns that should be considered before a decision is reached.

The first consideration is that Pioneers and Soldiers Memorial is a cemetery. It is not a park, a zoo, or in any formal sense, a garden. People visit to pay their respects to their family members or to learn about and pay their respects to some of the City's more interesting citizens. The key word is "respect." Introducing sheep and goats is not in that spirit.

Both Mike Kennedy and I expressed concern about the well-being about our two live-in deer. Deer react rather strongly to stress. We have refused numerous requests from print and television outlets to run stories about the deer and have asked visitors not to post photos of them on social media in an attempt to keep them safe. Almost everyone has cooperated. We know that the deer are a poorly-kept secret and that people really enjoy catching sight of them but we still don't want to call any unnecessary attention to them. We believe that adding additional animals would do that. This became a higher priority during the 2020 protests when one of the deer, stressed out from the smoke, fire, noise, and helicopters, miscarried. She was terrified. We have not shared that information widely because her admirers would find it distressing (as did we). We are committed to do everything that we can to keep them safe and secure. The older of the two has been in the cemetery for almost five years, and she considers it her space. So do we.

The cemetery has been a recognized green space along the Lake Street Corridor for at least two decades. In addition to the deer, it is home to red-tailed hawks, large numbers of songbirds, rabbits, raccoons, possums, mice and, of course, squirrels. In the fall, ducks and geese set down for a week or more resting up for their trip south. We had a variety of pollinator plants and shrubs but the deer ate them (leaving only the marigolds) so we need to try again. During the Lake Street Alignment Process, I met the Executor Director of Mgizi and we spoke about youth

from their programs planting traditional medicinal herbs and flowers in the cemetery. The answer is yes, absolutely.

Following are some of our environmentally-themed activities. We have:

- Planted (and hand watered) more than 300 trees. These plantings have planned and carried out by Eagle Scouts, U of M Ecology students, Phillips neighborhood organizations, and others, with support from the Park Board, the Division of Public Works, a host of die-hard volunteers, and the City Council. (The cemetery was the Hennepin County Regional Arbor Planting Site in 2003 and in 2021).
- Hosted a catered zero-waste luncheon fundraiser
- Hosted an annual Earth Day cleanup event for the past twenty or so years
- Written several articles about the cemetery's benefits as a green space for the Alley newspaper
- Paid to have the soil tested for potentially hazard chemicals before tapping the maple trees and making syrup. The cemetery was tested for arsenic because it is located in a superfund site. It tested clean for everything.
- Hosted three environmentally-themed puppet shows by In the Heart of the Beast Theatre (two of them commissioned by us) about trees and Monarch butterflies

Interestingly, the City is not the sole owner of the cemetery. Most of the graves (22,000 graves out of 27,000) are owned by the descendants of those buried there. Between 1919 and 1925, approximately 5,000 people were exhumed and reburied in other cemeteries. In 1927, the City sold bonds to buy out the previous owners' interests (i.e., the roads and cottage, and the 5,000 graves that they had managed to buy back from the families). The purchase did not include the 22,000 occupied graves. Although burials are rare, they still occur. Our most recent burial was on November 21, 2021. Grave markers also belong to the families.

The cemetery, including its grounds, is a designated landmark, both nationally and locally. That status might restrict what can be changed about the cemetery grounds. For several years, the cemetery was the only one in the State listed in the National Register, a tip of the hat to its physical structures but, more importantly, for its ties to the early-anti-slavery movement and the City's early immigrant and African-American populations, and veterans from six wars.

In an email, Mr. McDonough suggested that native grasses and plants that grow from 8 to 12 inches tall could replace the existing ground cover and that they would not require mowing. Approximately 2,000 people visit the cemetery every year, some to visit graves, some to attend programs. Many of our visitors are elderly and have limited mobility; accessibility is an issue for them. The ground is uneven as it is, and there are marker fragments that are potential tripping hazards. The caretaker will do "targeted mowing" to clear a path for anyone who needs help. We are careful to make it as safe as we can but the City requires our organization to carry a \$1 million liability policy that covers possible injuries or damage to markers. We are happy to do that.

The grounds are not fertilized or treated. The ground cover is variable. Some would call the plants weeds, some might call them wildflowers, but there is nothing that resembles a traditional

lawn or requires special care. There is no irrigation system or outside water source. Watering is not recommended since water is considered to be one of the leading causes of damage to old, marble markers.

There are a number of statements under “Reduction impacts...” but there no facts or figures to back them up. How much CO2 would be eliminated? How much is spent on fuel? How much on equipment and maintenance? Is the noise from one lawn mower an issue at one of the City’s busiest intersections?

Goats and/or sheep will not result in reduced labor costs. Mowing is only one of the caretaker’s many responsibilities. She cuts up and removes downed limbs and branches, picks up trash, rakes leaves (she took out more than 100 bags of leaves and trash last week). She takes care of the building. She works with carpenters, painters, and plumbers to make sure that the 151-year-old caretaker’s cottage is well maintained. During the winter, when the cemetery is closed, she comes in to plow a path to the cottage from so emergency vehicles can get through. She uses a bobcat to fill in holes after tree stumps have been removed. Most importantly, she is the public face of the cemetery. She helps families locate graves, oversees the placement of new markers (10 or 12 in a slow year), helps us connect with families to collect their stories. I’m sure that I’m forgetting many of the things that she does. And, of course, she tends the deer.

We are certainly not opposed to alternatives to fossil fuels and would fully support the search for alternative, more environmentally friendly alternatives. I am aware of a number of sites that have used goats/sheep for removing invasive species and aiding in other forms of turf management and think it’s a brilliant idea. But it is not appropriate for a cemetery. It simply isn’t respectful.

If any, or all of you, would like to visit the cemetery to get a better sense of what is involved in its upkeep, we would welcome you. I can be reached at s-hunt1@umn.edu.

Thank you.